Ethnicity, achievement and friendship: Korean Chinese students' construction of peer networks

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This research reported in this article ethnographically examines ethnicity and achievement in the formation of Korean Chinese students' peer networks. With the significance of children's peer networks in their interaction and school experience in mind, this article demonstrates how a group of ethnic Korean students at one Korean bilingual school with its competing ethnical projects of 'model minority' and the achievement of 'Han' students embrace, compromise or contest the officially dominant notion of ethnic integration and construct their peer networks. Through the findings from socio-metric tests and fieldwork, this research results look at the construction of Korean Chinese students' peer networks along the lines of ethnicity and academic achievement. This article emphasizes the need to scrutinize the assumption of ethnic integration under any special context since China's reform period, and points to the importance of multicultural themes in state education for equality and ethnic integration.

Keywords: peer network; ethnicity; achievement; Koreanness; Hanness; ethnic integration

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Introduction

This article ethnographically examines ethnicity and achievement in the formation of peer networks among a group of ethnic Korean students at a Korean bilingual school in Northeast China. The challenge of ethnic minority education in developing countries has become a matter of international urgency (UNESCO 2000). Modern states are expected to provide education to the children of immigrants and other language-minority children; in most cases, the intention is that these children are integrated with the children of the majority, both as a goal and as a means to reach the goal of schooling for integration into the mainstream. This is particularly true for China. There are 55 officially recognized 'minority nationality' (*shaoshu minzu*), which account for about 9.44% of the total population in China (NBSC 2005). Since the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), Chinese governments, in different ways, saw education as a means of:

> [I]ntegrating, controlling, and civilizing the various peoples who inhabit the border or peripheral regions of what was the empire, then the Republic, and now is the People's Republic of China (PRC). (Hansen 1999: XI)

Despite their foreign origins, ethnic Koreans in China have managed a peaceful cohabitation with the Han people and successfully adapted themselves to China's socialist regime (Olivier 1993), which can mainly be attributed to Korean loyalty to the communist party and its officially recognized contributions to the economy of northeastern China (Kim 2003; Lee 1986; Piao 1990). Koreans played a vital role in the

liberation of Manchuria, the civil war (1946-1949) and the Korean War (the 'Resist-America and Aid-Korea' campaign) (Choi 2001; Kim 2003; Lee 1986). The Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Northeast China is a strategically important border region adjoining the politically sensitive Korean Peninsula and Russia. In recent years, the contacts between ethnic Koreans in China and Koreans in the Peninsula involve the existence of the Korean community in Northeast China which becomes places for fugitives from North Korea and the potentially political link with the South Korean government or several nationalistic groups in South Korea (Choi 2001; Kim 2003). However, the contacts hardly cause any form of unrest, and ethnic Koreans keep intact their belief in the superiority of the communist party and its socialist system (Lee 1986; Mackerras 1994; Olivier 1993; Zhou 2000). Prior to Korean immigration on a large scale in the nineteenth century, northeastern China was largely uncultivated land (Piao 1990). Ethnic Koreans succeeded in reclaiming the land by cultivating rice paddies (Choi 2001). The increasing contacts with North Koreans and South Koreans since the 1990s also promote border trade between China and North Korea around the Korean regions in China and South Korean direct investment in China with ethnic Koreans as the middle-men, due to ethnic and linguistic ties (Choi 2001; Kim 2003). Koreans are the thirteenth largest minority with a population numbered 1,923,842 in China (NBSC 2005). An overwhelming majority of them reside in the three northeastern provinces of Jilin, Heilongjiang and Liaoning, commonly known as Manchuria in the west and referred to as *Dongbei sansheng* in China (Piao 1990). The government's classification project in the

1950s divided all nationalities into five stages of modes of production (primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist) (Hansen 1999). The Han people were considered higher on this scale than most of the minorities, many of whom have been regarded as representatives of earlier forms of society (Gladney 1994; Harrell 1995; Seeberg 2001). The Han people were placed 'near the "modern" end of a Marxist historical trajectory upon which China's minorities must journey' (Gladney 1994: 99). Nevertheless, in contrast to other minorities, especially those referred to as 'backward', the Korean is labelled as a model minority with cultural predispositions, which contribute to their educational success and economic advancement (Choi 2001; Lee 1986; Zhou 2000). Ethnic Koreans tend to regard China as their fatherland (*zuguo*), Korea as motherland (*muguo*) (Choi 2001) and think of themselves as daughters who have left the home of their parents to live in the homes of their husbands' parents.

For contemporary ethnic Koreans, their integration with Han majority is, however, challenged by their problematic status as a model minority during the course of China's economic reforms and open door policy since the end of 1970s (Choi 2001; Kim 2003; Kwon 1997; Jin 2006; Olivier 1993; Piao 2006; Shen 2006). There has been the increasing widening achievement gap among ethnic Korean students and many Korean Chinese do not adapt well to the market economy. Furthermore, China's new market economy and open door policy with the increasing benefits of Han majority from the economic liberalization and market prosperity and importance in Chinese language skills (Olivier 1993) help to lessen the feeling of being superior in educational attainment and

socioeconomic advancement among ethnic Koreans. All inevitably leads to the re-location of the relationship between ethnic Koreans and Han majority. Children's interaction or integration mainly takes place in peer networks. While research into race or ethnic relations in the multiethnic or multiracial schools have been frequently presented in the studies across the world (Connolly 1998; Gillborn 1990; Lee 1996; Lew 2004, 2006; Marinari 2006; Wright 1992), there is a serious lack of research on how contemporary ethnic Korean students in China construct their peer networks in the multiethnic and multicultural context. Through examining ethnic Korean students' construction of peer networks in a multiethnic bilingual school, this article seeks to contribute to the literature that critically examines the goal of ethnic integration in state education. This research results indicate that the Korean children's peer networks reveal competing ethnical stereotypes in school system and their implications on the friendship world of Korean children. With the stereotype of 'model minority' and 'Han' achievement, the ethnic Korean students tend to contest, compromise or be actively engaged in the interethnic friendship with 'Han' students and lead their peer networks to be constructed along the lines of ethnicity and academic achievement.

Children's peer networks

To children, how they perceive the causes of social events and of their own and others' behavior and how they react – both emotionally and behaviorally – to events are influenced by a desire to symbolize or represent their important group memberships

(Brewer 2003). There are a series of attitudes and types of behavior shared and reinforced through interaction and negotiation between children within peer groups (Kelle 2001). It has come to be known as child culture or student culture (Gillborn 1990; Hughes, Becker and Geer 1958). Child culture, however, does not imply a necessarily inferior culture (subculture). Gillborn (1990) points out that a group's shared understandings and agreements represent:

> [A] subculture in the sense that they are not handed down to the actors, but are created within the demands and confines of the institution and may sometimes stand in opposition to certain elements of its official culture. (47)

Child or student culture consists of the common understandings shared by the participants in it, and grows around 'the roles and identities relevant to the specific setting rather than those that are irrelevant or inappropriate' (Becker and Geer 1960: 53). School children's relations with their peers and their participation in a world of child culture frame much of their attitude toward and experience of school (Devine 2003). Much student learning takes place outside the classroom in interaction with peers. Children's friendship patterns affect each child's peer-group affiliation and in turn aspirations for educational attainment (Ballantine 2001). Harris (1995) in her theory of group socialization (GS theory) emphasizes the formation of children's personalities in outside-the-home peer groups, where children learn how to behave in public. According to Woods (1983), much student behavior seems to be aimless and meaningless, but it is,

in fact, guided by clear rules and principles, which largely reflect their peer-group cultures. A more comprehensive view of children may be best achieved by taking their group relations into account. As Asch (1987: 238) remarks:

> [I]t is correct to urge that we should strive to see persons in their uniqueness. But it is wrong to assume that we can best achieve a correct view of a person by ignoring his group relations.

The outside-the-home socialization taking place in peer groups of childhood and adolescence is responsible for the transmission of culture and for modification of children's educational attitude and aspiration, which may be consistent or not with the demands of institutions (Harris 1995; Lew 2006; Marinari 2006). In Marinari's (2006) study, a group of Korean students in the multiracial school socialized with White peers in order to ensure academic-oriented school success. In contrast, other ethnic Korean students rejected this school success and socialized with peer Koreans to make their Koreanness more visible in the school. Lew's (2006) study points out that while the Korean American students in one high school had the peer friendships which helped them to get information such as on college admission, in the other school the experience of the ethnic Korean students with their peers reinforced their non-academic orientation and active involvement in ethnic economy instead.

Research methodology

Data were collected from an ethnographic study with a group of ethnic Korean students, at the time of this study, who were participating at two fourth-grade classes in a Korean bilingual school, the researcher called FLK School in Liaoning Province (one northeastern province). The ethnic Korean students were fifth-generation Korean children born and raised in China, ranged from 10 to 11 years old. During the period of five-month fieldwork (September 2006 to January 2007), the socio-metric analysis (Bossert 1979) was used to examine the friendships among the twenty-seven ethnic Korean students involved. Each student was required to choose three whom the student referred to as friends both at the beginning and the end of fieldwork. Social world cannot be understood in terms of simple causal relationships (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Individuals' actions consist of continuous construction and reconstruction of responses on the basis of their interpretations of the social world, and the situations they are in (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Socio-metric study built on the stimulus-response model of human behavior might oversimplify the complexity of everyday school life. The socio-metric method was therefore associated with the ethnographic observation and interview in order to investigate Korean children's peer networks in the specific context (Gaskins, Miller and Corsaro 1992).

Field observation explored the structure and culture at FLK, shaping, constraining and in some cases defining social action of ethnic Korean students (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). In addition to observing in the classroom, the researcher also accompanied the student informants to recess, playground, and school assemblies

whenever possible. Semi-structured interviews with the students were used to obtain deep insights into their strategies in the construction of peer networks. Individual interview took place in the school meeting room. The length of each interview ranged from one to two hours. Each interview was audio-taped and all tapes were transcribed. Each interview was conducted in Chinese, and translation into English involved the interpretative translation through making sense of the meanings that the interviewees conveyed. In addition to individual interview, the students were also interviewed with their friends in peer groups in order to acquire their shared group goals and values. Interviews were supplemented by informal and natural conversations with the students, other non-Korean classmates, academic teachers and parents involved. The reliability of data was reached in this study through the different data collection methods (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007). By giving young children a voice, it was a new experience for the researcher to be on the receiving end of the power differential between children and adults, and to focus on children as social agents who created the production and reproduction of child culture (Corsaro 1997).

Ethnical projects of 'model minority' and 'Han' achievement at FLK

School organization contributes to the formation of child cultures, broadly along the lines of social class, gender, race, and ability (Ballantine 2001; Woods 1983). The organizational structure of school may facilitate or impede interracial friendships in schools where tracking or ability groups break down along racial lines (Lee 1996). FLK

School has not had a long history of dealing with ethnic diversity. It used to be a special-admit school, which accepted only ethnic Korean students in the pre-reform period before the end of 1970s. Rather, the growing number of non-Korean students referred to as 'Han' students at FLK marked a change to the student intake. The dramatic decline of Korean student intake yearly has led admission to FLK less ethnically selective in order to maintain enrollment. At the beginning of the autumn term 2006-07 when the fieldwork was undertaken, there were 327 students enrolled at FLK, which were composed of 83% Korean and 17% non-Korean including Han, Manchu and Mango who were enrolled as 'Han'. The teachers' stereotypical views of 'model minority' and 'Han' achievement, which were matched by children's own stereotypical views in friendship choices, helped to drive the wedge further between the student groups in terms of such as ethnicity and academic achievement (also see Ball 1981).

Model minority project

Many of the teachers at FLK would like to live up to the standards of model minority. The official discourse that chronicled the success of ethnic Koreans as a model minority in China began to appear as early as in 1951. In November 1951, Minister of Education Ma Xulun singled the Korean out as an outstanding model for minority education[1] (Choi 2001; Kim 2003; Lee 1986; Ma 1953; Olivier 1993; Zhang and Huang 1996; Zhou 2000). The heart of Korean achievements is, it is said, their cultural predispositions, which attach a high priority to the value of education (Choi 2001; Lee 1986). Such

accomplishments and the cultural explanations conferred confidence to the Korean teachers in ethnic culture and pride in ethnic identity. Studying at FLK was culturally expected, to be a time of self-exploration, of engagement and concern with issues of ethnic culture. The rise in ethnic consciousness was specifically accompanied by the prominence of Korean language and ethnically relevant extracurricular activities including music and labor techniques (mainly making *kimchi* – pickled vegetables).

At FLK, teachers' positive image of ethnic Koreans as a model minority was, however, combined with a negative view of whether ethnic Korean students had fulfilled what was expected of them as 'model students'. School administrators and teachers pointed to the decreasing educational attainment among ethnic Korean students and suggested that low-achieving ethnic Korean students should take advantage of school resources instead of sticking to sports and entertainment. For the teachers, the parental role as supplementing what the school was doing and filling in the gaps was desirable. But the Korean parents were considered to fail to do so because of their limited level of education and physical absence from family education.

'Han' achievement project

The myth of 'Han' achievement collectively labeled non-Korean students at FLK as educationally successful, even though the students represented heterogeneity in academic attainments. Korean education was considered as one part of China's ethnic integration. The 'success' of 'Han' students served as evidence that FLK was good enough for ethnic

integration. While the percentage of non-Korean students increased, the increase was described as the upward trend of FLK School. Non-Korean students were welcomed at FLK and seen as the flowers of ethnic integration.

The operation of the myth of 'Han' achievement became one potential source of the disadvantaged positions among ethnic Korean students at FLK. Academic achievement was probably the most important way students were able to gain status (Lee 1996). Since the 1950s, there were hierarchically ordered ethnicities (primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist) in relation to the level of social development and culture (Gladney 1994; Hansen 1999; Harrell 1995; Seeberg 2001). The discourse in the classification order of ethnicity: Han, 'model' minority, and 'backward' minority inevitably reaches into the very hearts of individuals and comes to influence and shape their sense of self in comparison to members of other ethnic groups. The promotion of successful 'Han' students at FLK led to blaming low-achieving ethnic Korean students and their parents for their academic problems.

Research findings

At FLK, the ethnic Korean students involved in two fourth-grade classes contributed to a range of selection standards especially along the lines of ethnicity and academic achievement while constructing friendship. For the students in category I, ethnic category membership was overwhelming. In contrast, the students in category II valued academic achievement as the main criterion for friendship, whereas the students in category III took

Han ethnicity and academic achievement into consideration. Child or student culture needs not be approved or formally specified by institutional rules and may even support deviation from those rules (Becker and Geer 1960; Deegan 1996; Hargreaves 1967; Lacey 1970). It is alternatively a product of non-dominant class culture which not only operates as an external influence through such as families, but is also recreated, produced and transformed by children in response to the school situation (Woods 1983). There were a series of attitudes and types of behavior shared and reinforced through interaction and negotiation between children within peer groups, which influenced the strength of ethnic integration in ethnic Korean students' school practice. The detailed description concerned itself with how the ethnic Korean students adapted to their situation as members of an ethnic minority in a school system where the physically dominant images of ethnic Koreans were concerned with academically advantaged position among 'Han' students. The process of peer interaction was far from neutral since stratification was a fundamental part of their educational experience at FLK which reflected, to a large extent, the social stratification under the consideration of elite system and ethnicity.

Category I: Acting 'Korean'

For the four ethnic Korean students in this category, their choice for making their 'Koreanness' much more visible than other ethnic Korean students influenced their choice of friendship groups. The four students chose to associate primarily with other ethnic Korean students and were rarely involved in interethnic friendships at FLK. With

the confidence in Korean language and identity, the students tended to separate themselves from those 'Han' students and 'acting Korean'. In the eyes of the students, what they experienced at school led them to challenge the myth of 'Han' achievement and constructed an ethnically separate peer culture.

To a certain extent, they were the ethnic Korean students who chose to speak Korean on campus or in classes when possible. Like a group of Korean American students with their emphasis on 'Koreanness' at school in Marinari's (2006) study, the strategies of ethnic visibility employed by the four ethnic Korean students here represented a powerful way to declare them as Korean and thereby claim a position within the social landscape of FLK School. The four students highlighted the significance of Korean language. Ethnic language is not only a means of communication but also an expression of one's cultural and ethnic affiliation (Postiglione 1999). As one student remarked:

> My baba [father] sends me to the school because it is a Korean school. My elder cousin and younger cousins also attend Korean school. My family is all Korean. They always tell me that I am a Korean, and I should speak more Korean than Chinese. My grandma particularly reminds me that I might be misunderstood as a Han, if I speak too much Chinese.

The four ethnic Korean students highlighted the strength of model minority in their school practice. They were proud of being Korean and were strongly willing to measure up to the standards of model minority with an emphasis on education in the ethnically-mixed classroom environment. The students insisted that Koreans were the

model minority and ethnic Korean students should live up to the standards of model minority. They tended to speak Korean with their Korean classmates, but spoke Chinese with the non-Korean peers. They believed that speaking Chinese to 'Han' students because 'Han' students did not understand Korean or did not understand good Korean. According to one student:

> I don't speak Korean with "Han" students. I think that their Korean is really bad and they don't understand me if I speak Korean with them. But I am able to speak Chinese. Hence I speak Chinese to them but speak Korean with Korean classmates.

The strategy of visibility attempted to declare themselves as not Han and thereby claim a position within the social landscape of students. However, for top-ranked 'Han' students, this behavior was unacceptable. For other ethnic Korean students, this behavior might threaten their efforts to establish interethnic friendships with 'Han' students. As a result, the students, especially low-achievers hardly obtained popularity and status among peers. Children in peer groups exercise power with each other, and position themselves in relation to each other in terms of their status and popularity (Deegan 1996). While being very Korean led the high-achieving ethnic Korean students in this category to experience more or less success, the low-achieving ethnic Korean students were much more possible to be excluded from peers. One high-achiever said this:

> For me, maintaining in the top rank helps me a lot. The top-rank means everything. It brings me friends, good image in the eyes of teachers and classmates. Especially,

> it helps me to maintain the dominant position among peers so that I can continue acting Korean with my friends.

In contrast, the low-achievers were largely excluded from both Korean and non-Korean classmates and became unable to receive any academic help from peers. In the eyes of their peers, they were seen as ‘naughty’ and ‘arrogant’ and failed to carve out a social space and faced a failure culture at FLK School.

Category II: Compromise in interethnic friendship

The seventeen ethnic Korean students in this category generally oriented themselves less toward ‘Koreanness’ or ethnicity than academic achievement in the choice of friendship. What they learned from their families and believed was to be competent in Chinese language and have a secure career in the mainstream. They tended to weaken the strength of model minority stereotype in their school practice. For them, ethnicity was not a main criterion of friendship selection. They were intended to get along with those high achievers irrespective of their ethnicity. One Korean student made this comment regarding the pattern of friendship:

> I tend to makes friends with top-ranked students. I compete with them academically. I feel that I am confident to compete with them, and surpass them eventually. Then I will become the Korean student in the top rank.

The ethnic Korean students tended to solely socialize with top-ranked students. They clearly differentiated high-achieving 'Han' students from low-achieving 'Han' students and consciously socialized with those high-achievers. According to the students, their school experience at FLK was intertwined with their persistent search for higher academic status, which led to easier future life. The ethnic Korean students were academically lower than the top-ranked 'Han' students. While they socialized with those top-ranked 'Han' students, they generally tended to hold a competitive consciousness in mind. Being competent in own mother tongue was one important pattern of competition. As one student asserted that Koreans should be able to speak their ethnic language just like Han people were competent in Chinese. According to this student:

> Our class teacher keeps saying that ethnic Korean students should speak Korean because "Han" students are speaking Korean better than Koreans. I really feel embarrassed because I as a Korean cannot speak Korean as good as my "Han" classmates.

The ethnic Korean students thus compromised in interethnic friendship in order to obtain academic status in the hierarchy of FLK School. However, the students represented a variety of academic attainments. They were not all successful in establishing friendship with top-ranked 'Han' students. While the high-achieving students benefited from their high-achieving friends for academic help, the low-achieving ethnic Korean students in this category had difficulty in searching for both academic and non-academic help from their peers. Although the low-achievers realized the significance

of peer networks, their lower academic achievement acted as a main barrier to hinder their ability to develop supportive relationships with peers and other institutional agents. It also seemed that the lower achievement further hindered their social development, including their experiences of anxiety, depression, and fear that inhibited them from performing school tasks. One student commented:

> You know, what bothers me most is being not helpful academically. My friends are all at the same level so that they couldn't help me at all. I am always refused by the outstanding students, you know.

Their socialization with a group of non academic-oriented students was becoming increasingly visible on campus. The staff expected trouble from the ethnic Korean students and a spiral of increasing control seemed to have developed. Hence, the low-achieving ethnic Korean students were in the especially disadvantaged position and received disproportionately more criticism from teachers.

Category III: Sticking with high-achieving 'Han' students

The action strategies of the six ethnic Korean students in peer groups struggled to resist the image of model minority and its implication for the lower academic status at FLK, especially in comparison with 'Han' students. The ethnic Korean students generally referred to themselves as half Han and half Korean. They believed that the identity could help them to earn the respect of other students and to move up the social ladder at FLK

School. As ethnic Korean students, they were more willing to socialize with high-achieving 'Han' students who were often active in all kinds of extracurricular activities and became popular among peers. They generally chose friends according to their academic achievement and 'Han' ethnicity. Unlike the students in other categories, the six ethnic Korean students in this category disclaimed themselves from the model minority stereotype and its cultural explanations and found that disclaiming provided them an opportunity for self-affirmation of the higher social status in FLK. The six ethnic Korean students expressed the disconnection between their achievement and 'Koreanness'. As one student remarked:

> I am always top-ranked. I think that…I am good at learning (*She laughs*). I just feel that I get pushed by my parents to be successful. And it's not like some people say, that it's the Koreanness-the value of education. It's like another whole different thing. I just try my best to be successful. There is nothing to do with Koreanness. At least, I don't feel that.

The success to go along with high-achieving 'Han' students was considered to represent their ability to transition smoothly between home and school, or between Korean world and mainstream world. The students emphasized the powerful currents of both Chinese and Korean memberships which were of great value in the world economy (Kibria 2002). One student in this category affirmed the values of interethnic friendship and believed that it represented the ability to formulate the 'Hanness' in their self-image and allowed comfortable movement between worlds:

> I am not pure Korean, not pure Chinese. I can speak both Korean and Chinese. I feel that there are two worlds in my life: one is Korean and the other is Chinese. I enjoy being half Korean and half Han, which makes me comfortable to communicate with both Koreans and Han people.

For the six students disclaiming the stereotypes of 'model minority' and 'Han' achievement could be a way of affirming their status at FLK. Two out of six students were top-ranked students and always served as model students for the rest of their classes. The other four were upper middle achievers. They felt empowered to challenge the myth of 'Han' achievement and the advantageous position among 'Han' students at FLK. According to one student:

> My mama said to me that I would not be able to learn Korean if I attended Han school. Then since I attend Korean school, I know more knowledge than "Han" students. And I am competent in Chinese. Thus I am in an advantageous position when I compete with "Han" and Korean counterparts.

The six ethnic Korean students in this category came from Korean families with a commitment to both Chinese and Korean memberships as strategically valuable in the global world. The relatively higher family economic status formed their positive self-affirmation. My conversations with them indicated that they were more involved in out-of-school classes in Chinese, English and Mathematics, while at the same time enjoying school resources. The self-affirmation suggested a kind of self-evident superiority in comparison with both Korean and 'Han' students. One student commented:

> It is important for me to make top-ranked 'Han' friends. I am a Korean. Koreanness is part of me. Now I am getting closed to 'Han' friends. I become competent in a smooth transition from home to school, from Korean community to mainstream society.

Conclusion: Friendship construction alongside ethnicity and academic achievement

The patterns of children's interaction and behavior in peer networks influence the formation of individual perspectives and concerns, and have an impact on their school practice. This has been widely realized in the literature (Harris 1995; Pollard and Filer 1999; Woods 1983, 1990). This study highlighted the significance of peer networks, which could help ethnic Korean students to advance academic and emotional attainments. However, the ethnic Korean students in different categories had very different friendship orientations and experienced different school worlds. The ethnic Korean students in category I tended to make their Koreanness much more visible in peer networks through socializing solely with Korean classmates. In contrast, for the ethnic Korean students in category II, their choice of friendship was largely dependent upon academic achievement which tended to weaken Koreanness and to socialize with top-ranked students, irrespective of their ethnicity. The ethnic Korean students in category III paid attention to both 'Han' ethnicity and academic achievement while selecting friendship groups and tended to socialize with top-ranked 'Han' students to utilize biculturalism in a productive manner and to develop personal characteristics as transnational. School children always strive to attain popularity and status. Children live in a social world structured by gender, class, age, and ability, which tend to position them unequally in relation to each other

(Deegan 1996). In social comparison with more advantaged groups (e.g., majority children), ethnic minority children commit to a range of strategies in peer culture for status among peers. In category I, the ethnic Korean students acted Korean in order to emphasize the status of ethnic Korean students at FLK. The ethnic Korean students in category II struggled for academic success as a way of upward academic mobility at FLK. In contrast, the ethnic Korean students in category III disclaimed both the images of 'model minority' and 'Han' achievement and led weight to a higher academic status in comparison with both ethnic Korean students and 'Han' students. The construction of peer networks among the ethnic Korean students at FLK held important lessons in relation to the stratification of FLK School along the lines of ethnicity and academic achievement, which might reflect the stratification in society. The process of constructing peer networks was intertwined with the activity of positioning: of locating Korean ethnicity and culture within the social hierarchy of China. The ability to speak mainstream language and acculturate into mainstream culture is a key determinant that allows members of a minority group to share state and market resources with fellow Han citizens (Shih 2002). In comparison with mainstream language, a few minorities such as Korean whose language also becomes cross-border language for business contacts with neighboring regions (Shih 2002). The Korean language as the first language is a key symbol of ethnic identity, and an expression of one's cultural and ethnic affiliation. Tové Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) in a discussion of the relationship between mother tongues and ethnic identities points out that people's ethnicity and languages can become positive

forces and strengths that can help to empower them. The support and maintenance of languages of origin would permit language minority groups within the current global migration pattern, to maintain valued transcultural/transnational elements for their linguistic and cultural rights (Banks 2004; Hoerder, Hébert and Schmitt 2005).

Ethnic integration is a common discourse on China's national policies toward its ethnic minorities in various periods (Dreyer 1997; Ping 1990). It is used to describe Chinese interethnic relationships that accommodate the meanings of national unity (Fei 1989; Mackerras 1994). Article 3 of Education Law of Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture (1994) stipulates that Korean education is one part of China's ethnic integration. In a pluralist country like China, education for its population is never separated from multiculturalism and diversity. Fei Xiaotong's (1991) '*duoyuan yiti geju*' which has been translated by Postiglione (2007) into 'plurality within the organic unity of the Chinese nationality' with its functionalistic value highlights the national unification and cultural pluralism of China. The very survival of a multicultural or a multilingual country not only implies the cultural pluralism among its ethnic minorities, but also implies the pluralism among its majority people. It is a two-sided acceptance: minority people learn majority language and culture, and majority people learn minority culture and language. China has been experiencing a huge social transformation in the reform period since the end of 1970s. The increasing mobilization of population puts different ethnic groups in various contact situations, which easily leads to conflict and cultural misunderstanding (Postiglione 2007). China's Constitution maintains the equal status of

ethnic minorities and their right to preserve and develop own languages and customs (Iredale et al. 2001). Although there is a huge diversity existing among China's ethnic minorities, what makes one case to be generalized to all minorities is their willingness in education to maintain ethnic language and culture under multiculturalism and to obtain upward social mobility in a harmonious society. This research contributes to the literature on ethnic Koreans in China and the discourse of 'model minority' by presenting that school-level dynamics are instrumental in leading ethnic Korean students to redefine and rearticulate their school worlds. State education will be, therefore, necessary to develop an alteration of government priorities including the multicultural themes and equality in education. A key goal of multicultural education is to help students gain greater self-understanding by viewing themselves from the perspectives of other cultures. It assumes that with the acquisition of mutual understanding, respect may follow. A globalized multiculturalism will reduce the discrimination that members of ethnic groups experience with the increasing mobility of population and all kinds of contacts with the mainstream in China's reform period.

Note

1. Ethnic Koreans in China are considered to have the highest level of college attendance and lowest level of illiteracy rates (Ma 2003; Zhou 2000). According to Ma (2003), Korean Chinese illiteracy rate is 3.3% of the population, whereas the national average is 9.5%. While attendance in higher education among ethnic Koreans is the highest with 8.6%, the national average is 3.8%.

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